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ABSTRACT

There is not any one thing or any one group that can solve all the problems involved in staffing rural and small schools. It is quite common to find a bimodel distribution of teaching faculty in rural and small schools--those with less than 3 years and those with more than 10 years of experience. It could be inferred that either recruitment strategies and hiring criteria are inappropriate, or there are factors that cause a sizable group to leave teaching in that district in the early years of their career. While the problems are not unique to rural schools, even one unfilled position in a rural school has a rather dramatic effect on the educational program and young people in that school. There are many intervening factors and little research in the area. These suggestions could help: a national and state priority for development of qualified teachers for all schools should be established; teacher training institutions should establish identifiable programs for rural teaching; the profession should accept its responsibility for providing services to students regardless of their location; networks of persons in all job categories should be developed to reduce the feeling of professional isolation among rural and small school teachers. (BRR)

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EXCELLENCE THROUGH CREATIVE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF STAFF FOR RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOLS

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Excellence Through Creative Recruitment and Retention of Staff for Rural and Small Schools

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The reasons why teachers leave and/or express dissatisfaction with rural/small schools are as diverse as rural/small schools themselves. Attempts by me to explain all the reasons and/or to describe foolproof solutions would be futile, if not foolhardy.

Excellence, a theme of this seminar, is equally incapable of being defined to the satisfaction of all. For the processes of recruitment and retention to make any sense at all, we must assume that one is capable of predicting who will be effective in teaching in rural schools and that effectiveness will be maintained, if certain personal, social, economic, and professional needs are satisfied. At the same time, we must be cautious about the drive to "fill open positions" regardless of some important factors, such as academic preparation and other traits thought to be prerequisites to effective teaching.

It is quite common to find a bimodal distribution of teaching faculty in rural and small schools - those with less than three years and those with more than ten years of experience. In other cases one finds 45% of the teachers with less than five years of experience and a 30% turnover each year. From this one could infer that either recruitment strategies and the criteria used for hiring are inappropriate, or there are factors that cause a sizable group to leave teaching in that district in the early years of their career. Probably all of these are accurate, at least to some

degree. Turnover, resulting in the need for improved recruitment and retention activities, is often caused by dissatisfaction and/or ineffectiveness. The reasons associated with this dissatisfaction and ineffectiveness seem to fall into the following areas:

- professional isolation
- social isolation
- inadequate/unrealistic preparation
- excessive job-related demands
- limited opportunities for advancement

The data in a 1979 study by Muse and Stonehocker, involving teachers in high schools with 200 or fewer students in five western states, illustrate quite vividly these problem areas. Two other studies underway in the Center for Rural Education and Small Schools at Kansas State University are showing similar results, but clearly there are many individual and unique situations.

If we assume that the best qualified and the most experienced teachers are the most effective, then clearly recruitment and retention must be improved, whether or not it is creative. Recruitment is not the sole responsibility of the local school administrator. It is a long time process that begins when a student enters K-12 schools and continues up to the time of employment. People don't decide to teach or to teach in a particular area or size school at age 22. They are influenced throughout their life. Herein lies much of the problem. Little encouragement is provided before or in teacher education programs for students to teach in small schools, and only in rare cases does one find programs that attempt to prepare teachers for small schools. In fact, in a study reported in a paper by Horn in 1981 at the national meeting of AERA, several colleges indicated that one should not be prepared for teaching in unique settings, such as rural schools.

reason," but not a very valid one. Are salaries really lower in rural areas, particularly when the cost of living is taken into consideration? The interview process and the interest shown in a candidate are very important. Most rural school administrators are not prepared as recruiters or interviewers, yet they must compete for the same employees.

State departments of education have generally not been very active in the recruitment and retention business. However, they are responsible to the public for the quality of K-12 education in that state, and as much concern should be given to these areas as is given to setting the standards for certification and accreditation. They are related and should be addressed at a high level of concern and appreciation for the needs of all students in the state. What does a student gain when state monies are withheld from a school district when it cannot find a teacher to teach foreign language, or for that matter, who is to blame?

From a rural school superintendent's point of view, there are several important points that help determine quality among faculty. Thomas Moriarty reported feedback from a study in 1981 among school superintendents of 45 school districts in the sparsely populated plains of western South Dakota. Sixty percent noted their principal problem was maintaining a quality staff of teachers. Although salaries were assessed as critical, the larger problem is obtaining committed personnel who can effectively deal with geographic isolation, population sparsity, and the essential "community-fit" to the life style and expectations of rural communities. Quality was not defined as a more highly credentialed teacher but rather more competent generalists who can work with the unique strengths and weaknesses found in a rural setting. This implies a teacher should be capable of dealing with the uniqueness of the community and its citizenry

However, one cannot avoid the reality of the problem areas cited above. Teaching is not the only profession that is impacted by the perceptions of living and working in small towns or rural areas. I cite medicine and law as two others. In the mid-1970's, Halter found professional isolation to be a significant determinant to the meeting of medical needs in rural South Dakota. Unfortunately, parents can't seek alternative services, as is true with medicine or law, even though it may be inconvenient.

No massive Federal program will provide a long term solution to the problem. However, the Federal government can help by providing incentives and challenges for the development of effective programs. I am aware of two programs where this has occurred, even though this was not the primary objective. The Career Opportunities Program and the early Teacher Corps Program did demonstrate in some cases how persons can be recruited and trained to teach in rural areas. National priorities and targeted training and development projects could provide the challenges that are necessary to provide a noticeable impact on longstanding patterns of action.

At the local level, I think one should present a realistic picture to the prospective teacher and then do everything possible to diminish the cause for dissatisfaction. This could take the shape of forming consortia with other districts, exchange teaching, arranging for college/universities to offer on-site credit and non-credit course work for teachers, differentiated staffing and most importantly including the new teacher in the community in all of its activities. At the same time, some people will never be satisfied in a rural area, and the worst thing you can do is try to keep them by extrinsic rewards. While low salaries are often cited as a reason for leaving a rural school, I think that is a "socially acceptable public

as well as being inventive in using community resources, preparing curricular materials, and teaching children rather than subjects.

I doubt that these observations are unique to western South Dakota, and one would rarely question the desired skills or abilities, regardless of the setting. However, the key phrase may be "dealing with the uniqueness of the community and the citizenry."

In summary, there is not any one thing or any one group that can solve all the problems involved in staffing rural and small schools. Individuals and local settings are unique, and the proper match should be made. Education, honesty, support, concern and commitment are ingredients that are necessary for any effective effort.

Appropriately, I wish to quote a former governor of Kansas, Robert Bennett, while he was a state senator and when he summarized a conference on "educational careers and recruitment" on the KSU campus in 1968.

> I think the best thing that you people could do to recruit teachers is to stop knocking your own profession. I've been amazed at the fact that when you talk to most teachers all they can say about their profession is bad. We're underpaid, we're overworked, we're overeducated or undereducated in some cases, the job is poor, the administrator is bad, it's too much politics or too little politics. You come up with all these complaints. Every other profession has complaints, but most of the time they don't share these complaints with the public. They do it privately and try to improve the situation.

A friend of mine has a wall-hanging in his office that says, "There are three good reasons for becoming a teacher - June, July and August." Aren't there several good reasons for teaching in rural or small schools, and why don't we tell the world about them?

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that recruitment and the retention of qualified personnel for rural and small schools are real and widespread problems. These problems are not unique to rural schools, but unfilled positions, even one in a rural school, has a rather dramatic effect upon the educational program and the young people in that school.

There are no easy solutions and, to my knowledge, there are a limited number of exemplary efforts. Overall, we all must play a part in the very complicated procedures for effective recruitment and retention. Whatever recommendations can be gleaned from this presentation or from those cited below must at best be considered as suggestions. There are simply too many intervening factors, and there is precious little research in this area. Among my suggestions are the following:

1) A national and state priority for the development of qualified teachers for all schools should be established. This priority could be expressed through the various projects for training, development and research.
2) Schools and colleges of education should establish identifiable programs for the preparation of teachers for rural schools at both pre-service and in-service levels.
3) The profession should carefully examine its role in the total enterprise of education and assume an adequate share of the responsibility for providing education for all children and youth, regardless of their geographic and demographic location.

4) School administrators should retain the services of qualified persons to recruit and/or screen applicants for teaching and administrative positions.

5) Efforts should be made by all to develop and conduct inservice and advanced studies programs for the least experienced teachers.

6) Networks of persons in all job categories should be developed to reduce the feeling of professional isolation among rural and small school teachers.